



**Gilles de Rais de Montmorency-Laval**

**Gilles de Montmorency-Laval**, more commonly known as **Gilles de Rais**, was a 15<sup>th</sup> century French nobleman, Breton baron, and marshal of France. He was known as an accomplished lieutenant to and protector of **Sainte Jehanne d'Arc "la Pucelle"** (the Maid of Heaven) (1412-1431) during the sieges of Orléans, one of the turning points of the **Hundred Years' War** and her first military victory, and Paris and experienced significant renown and prestige before his eventual downfall, when he was arrested, and later executed, for **Satanism**, along with the abduction, rape, mutilation, and murder of more than 150 children (some estimates put the figure as high as 800). But was he really the most infamous sexual criminal in history? the monster he was made out to be, or was he the unfortunate victim of political betrayal?

In 1404 the wife of **Guy de Laval** gave birth to his son, as she lay exhausted with the child in her arms I doubt she would have known what he was going to grow up to be. He was an orphan by aged 11 and heir to a vast family fortune that included several castles in the west of France. From a very early age Gilles de Rais was considered to be extremely ambitious and he grew up with his grandfather after his father died in Machecoul, *near the border of*

*Brittany*. His first two marriage attempts ended up with the brides being killed, which makes some authors link him to **Bluebeard**. However, in 1420, he (age 16) managed to abduct and secretly marry his wealthy cousin **Catherine de Thouars** of Brittany.

He inherited a lot of domains from both his father and maternal grandfather, but also due to his good marriage. He was known to live an extremely luxurious life by maintaining many servants and spending money on extravagant decorations. He was said to have kept a more lavish estate than the king. In the same year as his marriage, de Rais fought in the wars of succession to the duchy of Brittany, and later, he fought for the Duchess of Anjou against the English in 1427: He served as a commander in the Royal Army between 1427-and-1435. He became an accomplished lieutenant and was assigned to Sainte Jehanne's guard, fighting several battles by her side. He obtained the title of Maréchal de France with a trio of commanders that were subordinated directly to the Royal Connetable - and awarded letters of patent allowing him to add the *fleur-de-lys* to his coat of arms. He continued to serve in Sainte Jehanne d'Arc's special guard and fought next to her when Paris was attacked... - and when she (age 19) was burnt at the stake in Rouen by the English on 30 May 1431,<sup>1</sup> it is said that he went into a state of self-destructive madness. Even if he was considered to be a murder, his military career was exemplary and he was recognized as an excellent soldier.

Since he was extremely rich already, he retired in 1435 from military duty and public life, and began to change his lifestyle. He constructed a chapel where he officiated. He *also* promoted various theatrical performances in Brittany, a spectacle that ended up almost bankrupting him. He was even forced to sell off his family properties in order to bring in the money needed to support his lifestyle.

In 1435, Gilles de Rais received a decree from the king, restraining him from selling or mortgaging his lands, which ultimately was one of the factors that made kept him from continuing with his decadent style. It is said that at this point, de Rais developed an interest in *esotericism* and sought to gain knowledge, power and riches through engaging in various rituals, although the accuracy of this information is debatable. More-so, after he retreated to his castle at **Tiffauges**, it is claimed that he turned to the practice of *alchemy*, importing sorcerers from around Europe. Thus, he lost some of his fortune - and, when meeting **Francesco Prelati**, a Florentine sorcerer who was alleged to have sadistically promised him that he could regain his lost riches with the help of magic, supposedly suggesting the sacrifice of children... de Rais is supposed to have started performing unnatural acts of sorcery.

Gilles de Rais' illustrious military career would soon come to an end after he insulted **Geoffroi de Ferron** in 1440, the powerful treasurer of the neighboring province in Brittany by having his brother beaten and imprisoned. He was arrested along with all of his servants following a dispute with a priest during the celebration of mass. Gilles de Rais was brought to trial in Nantes, first before an ecclesiastical tribunal under the direction of the bishop of Nantes and then before a civil court. Many witnesses were brought forward to testify against him, including his most loyal servant, **Étienne Corrillaut dit Poitou**. He refused to plead to the charges but eventually he declared himself not guilty. The subsequent ecclesiastical investigation supposedly uncovered a dark and brutal side to de Rais.

He and his servants were accused of torturing, raping, and killing hundreds of children, beginning in 1426. Many peasants who lived around his castle claimed *that* their children had begged for food at the castle and then were never seen again. All manner of graphic and ghastly descriptions emerged during the trials, accusing de Rais of all kinds of despicable acts including dismemberment, decapitation, necrophilia, rape, cannibalism, and Satanism. The extensive witness testimony convinced the judges that there were adequate grounds for establishing his guilt.

At first de Rais refused to please to the charges, but when threatened with excommunication and torture, he confessed that he was both a paedophile and a murderer. He *later* described how he "inflicted various types and manners of torment; sometimes they severed the head from the body with dirks, daggers, and knives, sometimes they struck them violently on the head with a cudgel or other blunt instruments, sometimes they suspended them with cords from a peg or small hook in his room and strangled them; and when they were languishing he committed the sodomistic vice on them." Sexual encounter occurred before or after death and it seemed that he preferred boys; *however*, when they weren't available, girls were the victims, but he still preferred sodomy in their case. It seems that Gilles de Rais *also* kept his favorite victims' limbs and heads after the murders and kissed them. He was absolutely fascinated with the act of death and watched closely how his victims died, often masturbating in the process. Some confessions show even more gruesome images, as he described how he loved the elastic warmth of the victims' intestines. He *also* liked to rip their hearts through wounds that he slowly enlarged and he had a preference for children with blonde hair and blue eyes with ages between 6-to-18.

This meant forfeiture of both his property and his life. Gilles de Rais was condemned to death and hanged at Nantes on 26 October 1440, as were his body servants, Poitou and **Henriet**.

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<sup>1</sup> An illiterate farm girl from Lorraine in eastern France, **Sainte Jehanne d'Arc** disguised herself as a man in her campaigns. During her battles against the English and armies of the Duke of Burgundy, Jehanne was said to hear voices from a trio of Saints instructing her to deliver France from her enemies. She was finally captured by the Burgundians and sold to the English, who had her tried for witchcraft in Rouen.

She is said to have died of smoke inhalation. The Cardinal of Winchester is recorded as having ordered her to be burnt a second time. Her organs still survived this fire, so a third burning was ordered to destroy the body completely. Her cinders and debris were to be thrown into the Seine. However, in 1867 ashes that were said to include remains of Sainte Jehanne d'Arc were found in the Paris loft of an apothecary. These were transferred to a museum in Chinon where they are still kept.

Although Gilles de Rais was convicted through his own confessions and numerous witness accounts, many doubts have emerged in recent decades about the court's verdict. It is now widely accepted that the trial of Gilles de Rais was a miscarriage of justice. He was a great war hero on the French side; his judges were pro-English and had an interest in blackening his name and, *possibly*, by association, that of Sainte Jehanne d'Arc. His confession was obtained under threat of torture and also excommunication, which he dreaded.

A close examination of the testimony of his associates, in particular that of Poitou and Henriot, reveals that they are almost identical and were clearly extracted by means of torture. Even the statements of outsiders, alleging the disappearance of children, mostly boil down to hearsay; the very few cases where named children have vanished can be traced back to the testimony of just eight witnesses. There was no physical evidence to back up this testimony, not a body or even a fragment of bone.

In 1992, a Vendéen author and historian named **Gilbert Prouteau** was hired by the Breton tourist board to write a biography about Gilles de Rais. Prouteau sensationally proclaimed that de Rais was innocent and presented a solid case to support the fact that de Rais was a victim of a political betrayal. Although the book, "*Gilles de Rais ou la Gueule du Loup*" became a bestseller in France, it was never translated into English. Hence, in the English-speaking world, de Rais is still very much presented as a sadistic serial killer, while in France, the belief in de Rais' innocence has become the prevailing view.

Many scholars now maintain that de Rais was a victim of an ecclesiastic plot or act of revenge by the Catholic Church or French state. Evidence comes not only from the 'show trial', in which de Rais was forced to confess under threat of torture, and witness testimony was believed to have been given out of torture, self-interest or spite, but from the fact that the prosecutor, the Duke of Brittany, conveniently received all the titles to de Rais' former lands after his conviction. His judges also stood to gain from his death: In fact, **Jean V** Duke of Brittany, who enabled his prosecution, disposed of his share of the loot before de Rais was even arrested, dividing the land among his own nobles.

Because French law allows an appeal for rehabilitation even in cases of capital punishment, a unique arbitration court of lawyers, writers, historians and politicians was appointed in 1992 to re-examine the evidence and decide whether there was sufficient evidence to show whether Gilles de Rais might have been framed. The case sensationally resulted in an acquittal, and de Rais was declared innocent.